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In Their Own Words: Latina Success in Higher Education

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Greater numbers of Latinas are participating in postsecondary education, however these gains have not resulted in increased graduation rates. This study examines the lived experiences of 36 Latina baccalaureate graduates to gain a deeper understanding of how they achieved this important educational goal.

During the 1990s, analyses of data stressed that Latinos had the lowest postsecondary participation rate of any racial or ethnic group (Cardoza, 1991; Martinez-Thorne, 1995). A decade later, there is evidence that although participation rates have increased, there are continued disparities in baccalaureate outcomes between Latino and Caucasian college students (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2003; Council of Economic Advisers, 2000; Fry, 2002; Vernez, & Mizell, 2001). Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Fry (2004) found that, among those who entered the community college as "minimally qualified" for postsecondary education, 16% of Caucasians completed a bachelor's degree compared to only 7% of Latinos. Fry used the same database to indentify a 23% discrepancy in the baccalaureate completion rates of "qualified" Caucasian and Latino students enrolled in non-selective four-year institutions.

Of particular note is the difference in postsecondary participation between Latinas and Latinos. A recent report by the Pew Hispanic Center found that 44% of Latinas with a high school diploma pursued postsecondary education, in comparison to 34% of the Latinos with the same credential (Fry, 2009). The report also indicates that a greater number of Latina participants have not resulted in greater numbers of Latina graduates. One common explanation of the low baccalaureate completion rate is the lack of Latino/a role models among K–12 faculty and administrators (Cardoza, 1991; Ett, 2008; Hodgkinson, 1992; Howard, 2006; Martinez-Thorne, 1995). There is consensus that additional Latina role models in classrooms and administrative positions

[1]I use the terms Latino/a and Hispanic interchangeably in this article. Participants in this study also used the terms Chicano and Mexican-American.

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would provide the leadership to facilitate increased Latina graduation rates. As a preliminary step, it is important to learn from those who have completed the baccalaureate—a basic requirement to obtain a K–12 position or to pursue the graduate education necessary for postsecondary employment.

Literature Review

The literature on the reasons for the disparity in baccalaureate completion between Latinos and Caucasians is fairly limited. The National Center for Education Statistics identified seven characteristics that negatively impact baccalaureate completion (NCES, 2002). These include delayed postsecondary enrollment, part-time enrollment, not having a regular high school diploma, working full-time, being financially independent, having children or dependents, and being a single parent. Although these characteristics are applicable to all postsecondary students, Fry (2003) stressed that Latino undergraduates are more likely to experience these risk factors.

In their examination of Latino college attendance and degree attainment, Swail, Cabrera, and Lee (2004) identified two different categories of characteristics that may contribute to the lower percentages of Latino degree completion. The first category includes characteristics concerning high school, and their analysis revealed that Latinos were more likely to have been retained at a grade level for an additional year, attended more than two high schools, completed lower level mathematics courses, earned a grade of C or lower in at least one course, or to have dropped out. They also found that Latinos were more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to have earned a GED rather than a high school diploma. The second category includes family and personal characteristics such as limited English proficiency, parents who did not graduate from high school or have no postsecondary experience, having a sibling who dropped out, becoming a parent during high school, and lower socio-economic status.

In a recent study comparing Latino degree attainment between students who initially enrolled in a two- or four-year institution, Arbona and Nora (2007) found two factors that significantly increased the likelihood of obtaining a bachelor's degree regardless of the initial institutional type; enrollment in postsecondary education immediately after high school and continuous enrollment while attending college. In terms of Latino students who began at

community colleges, two pre-college factors also significantly increased the probability of completing a bachelor's degree. The expectation of earning a college degree during the 10th grade and completing a rigorous high school curriculum increased the probability of Latinos who initially enrolled in a community college by 93% and 59% respectively. In terms of Latino students who began at four-year colleges or universities, two pre-college factors and three college behaviors also significantly increased the probability of completing a bachelor's degree. If in the 10th grade your parents expected that you would attend college and earn a degree, you were 33% more likely to complete a degree than if the expectations were that you would not attend or not complete the degree. In addition, if at least some of your friends planned to attend college, you were 40% more likely to finish a bachelor's degree than if few or none of your friends indicated that college was in their future. Full-time enrollment, completing a large proportion of classes attempted, and first year academic performance increased the chances of graduation by 50%, 55%, and 24%, respectively.

The available literature lacks studies focused on developing an understanding of the experiences of Latinos who have navigated the path to the baccalaureate degree. What processes and meanings do they attach to the challenges and barriers they faced in completing a bachelor's degree? What meaning and perspective can they provide to improve efforts to increase baccalaureate completion among Latinos and to guide those who follow? As the participation rates of Latinas with high school diplomas is approaching 50% and are 10% greater than the participation rates of Latinos, a gender-specific study may provide the most pertinent information.

Conceptual Framework

Path dependence was originally an economic theory but has become a popular phrase, used in a broad fashion to mean that history matters (Pierson, 2004). This wider use of the term has been criticized as trivial (Page, 2006). Heller (2006), however, points out that path dependence has been useful in examining and understanding non-optimal outcomes. As the American higher education system has operated, there has been a substantial increase in the number of Latinas participating in postsecondary education, yet their baccalaureate completion rates lag significantly behind other racial and ethnic groups (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Fry, 2002, 2004; Lee, Mackie-Lewis, & Marks, 1993; Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005). The non-optimal outcome of lower completion rates supports the path dependence framework.

Moreover, even the critics of path dependency agree that different histories happen. Path dependency helps explain how and why some Latina college students complete a bachelor's degree and others do not. It would

seem that there are two options to improving the baccalaureate completion rates of Latinos. Fry (2004) stresses the importance of dramatically increasing the numbers of Latinos who attend more selective institutions of higher education as the means to increase baccalaureate attainment rates. A second option would be to learn from the experiences of others and attempt to increase the success rates at all types of postsecondary institutions. This conceptual framework focuses on the words of George Santayana, a Spanish-American philosopher, "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

Methodology

To gain insight into the experiences of Latinas who had earned a bachelor's degree I employed a phenomenological approach (Merriam, 2002). This approach focuses on a phenomena (completing a baccalaureate degree) with the analysis based on the perspective of the individual (the Latina student) experiencing the phenomenon. To gather information a series of face-to-face interviews were conducted, the primary method of data collection used in the phenomenological framework (Merriam, 2002). Originally guided conversations were considered (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), an interview process that would allow the participants to talk freely about their experiences in pursuing and completing a bachelor's degree. To ensure that the same information was gathered from each participant, a semi-structured interview protocol was incorporated (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Primary questions for the semi-structured interview were drawn from the studies reported in the literature review.

Participants in the study graduated from a nonselective, public Hispanic-serving university in the Southwestern United States (SWU). At the time of the study, the institution had an unduplicated headcount of 14,450 undergraduates. Latino enrollment at the institution was 90% of the total student body and 60% of the students were women. The vast majority of SWU students are from low socio-economic backgrounds, with 80% of the full-time, first-time undergraduate students receiving federal grants. A total of 36 females participated, each self-identified as Hispanic and completed a baccalaureate degree between May 2003 and May 2007.

Access to the participants was provided through the Office of the Registrar (the Office) at SWU. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the Office identified potential participants through purposeful sampling, based on the criteria of Hispanic designation and baccalaureate completion after May 2003. Potential participants were sent a letter from the registrar, explaining the study and inviting their participation in face-to-face interviews. The Office also collected the RSVPs and scheduled the interviews. I spent five days on the campus of SWU conducting the interviews in semi-private loca-

tions on the campus. Two separate permissions were obtained from the participants, to conduct the interview and to audio record the interview. At the completion of each interview, I summarized my interpretation of the primary points in the answers to each question and asked each participant to verify or revise my summary (a form of member checking).

Analysis

To analyze the data I reviewed field notes, the summary statements and transcripts of the interviews through an interpretative approach (Berg, 2004), attempting to capture the essence of the participants' descriptions of the challenges/issues/barriers they faced in completing the baccalaureate, how they overcame the challenges/issues/barriers, and their suggestions for improving the baccalaureate completion rate of Latinas. In searching for the telos of these accounts I drew on the available literature on Latino/a college attendance and degree attainment. This interpretive approach suggested themes for additional analysis to present a more comprehensive explanation of the lived experiences of the participants than would have been achieved by the condensing of data by sorting or coding discreet words or phrases.

Themes

As mentioned in the methodology section, the findings of previous studies were used to develop the primary interview questions. Particular factors or characteristics that have been reported to positively or negatively impact the baccalaureate attainment of Latinos is included in the narrative that follows, but the analysis focused on identifying broader themes. Three themes emerged from the experiences of the participants—entrance to the academy, retention/return, and reaching the goal.

Entrance to the Academy

All of the participants indicated that the process of entering the academy was an important factor to their completion of the bachelor's degree. Only one participant did not immediately enroll in a postsecondary institution after completing high school and all of the participants were high school graduates, supporting the findings of previous studies regarding postsecondary participation of Latinos (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). There were, however, distinct differences between the Latinas who were first- or second-generation college participants. Responses from second-generation college participants indicated that participation in postsecondary education was encouraged and planned. Vanesa, from a family where both the mother and father had earned college degrees, explained:

> There was no discussion about 'going to college' with my parents, it was expected that I was going to complete a bachelor's degree as a minimum. My parents did ask that I consider staying at home and attending SWU, they said that way I wouldn't have to work to help pay for my education because that was something that made college more difficult for them.

Latinas who were first-generation pointed to a broader social network of individuals who influenced their decision to pursue postsecondary education. This network included the extended family, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, as well as immediate family members. Family friends, employers of members of the extended family, and clergy members were also included in this social network—often referred to as "like a member of my family".

More than two-thirds of the first-generation college Latinas referenced some type of role that an individual in this network played in their entrance to the academy. The influence of these individuals, however, did not occur prior to the junior year of high school—an indication that the Latina would be less likely to complete a degree (Arbona & Nora, 2007). The data reveal a distinction between family members who have not participated in postsecondary education (and influence attendance) and family members who have participated in postsecondary education (and serve as champions). The concept of champions is discussed later in this section of the paper.

A number of institutional support systems were also identified as key factors in the decision to enter the academy. Knowing that an affordable, on-campus day care center was available was important to Latinas who were single parents with children who were not school aged. An after school program provided support for single parents with children in elementary and middle school. Latinas who were less confident about their academic abilities or needed developmental instruction identified the existence of a learning support center—with professional and peer tutoring, supplemental instruction, and developmental courses—as a support system that influenced their matriculation decision. All but one Latina enrolled immediately after high school, but only three completed the baccalaureate by attending full-time. As a result, the overwhelming majority of participants became non-traditional aged during their pursuit of the degree and most were aware that they were not on a four-year completion path. Support for non-traditional aged students such as extended student service hours, lockers, a study lounge, and representation in the student senate were reported as factors that led the Latinas to believe that they could be successful in postsecondary education. Transparency, in the sense that professional and staff members across the institutions were aware of these services, was important. Mary shared her first college experience:

> I went to ask about going to college. . . . I didn't have an appointment or anything, just walked in. They sent me to talk to an academic advisor, but he knew about everything. By the end of the afternoon I had applied, been admitted, enrolled in two classes, registered my daughter in the child care center, and had an interview scheduled for a part-time job. If he only would have talked to me about what to major in . . . just the classroom stuff, I wouldn't have signed up for classes that day and the child care and part-time job made it possible for me to start . . . I don't know if I would have come back.

Persistence/Return

Role models are a part of Latino culture (Garcia & Figuerora, 2002) and the participants in this study indicated that they sought Latina role models and mentors who had been successful in postsecondary education. Each of the Latina participants referenced the president, a Latina who had been an undergraduate student and a faculty member at the institution, as an important role model and an inspiration to participate in postsecondary education and persist towards the degree. All but two of the participants identified Latina females in faculty or administrative positions at the institution as role models or informal mentors who influenced their persistence towards degree completion. Slightly more than one-half of the participants identified Latina peers or Latina alumnae as inspirational role models. All of the participants who had extended family members who had attended or graduated from a college or university (35%) identified the family member(s) as a role model that influenced persistence and degree completion. Zirkel (2002) points to the importance of role models in similar situations to enable Latinas to recognize what is achievable. The lived experiences of the participants in this study support that contention.

For several Latina participants, the initial purpose of pursuing postsecondary education was to obtain a job that did not require a bachelor's degree. Several of these individuals completed a certificate or associate's degree and entered the workforce. After working for a number of years, they returned to postsecondary education to complete a baccalaureate degree. Becky provides a description of this route to the degree:

> I completed the computer tech program at a community college that is less than an hour away. I made good money working in computers, but after six or seven years it had become too routine, the same thing day after day. I thought, is this the rest of my life . . . wasn't there more? I did well at the community college. My supervisor at work encouraged me to go back to school. I was able to get a small scholarship from the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and my employer let me move to a part-time job.

A number of participants shared stories of peers who had not received

such encouragement or support from business or the civic community and dropped out. In many of these instances, an individual had asked to change their work schedule to accommodate their class schedule and had been told that they could not. Lorena shared a more positive experience with her employer:

> My boss was always asking me how I was doing with school. He kept telling me to let him know if I needed time off to study or for a test. I didn't ask often . . . but just knowing that if I needed time off for school I could have it and I wouldn't lose my job made me worry less.

The participants had to overcome a variety of issues and barriers while completing the bachelor's degree. Common in the descriptions of their experiences was the characteristic of approaching these situations as challenges to overcome rather than avoid. Each spoke of a particular moment or situation when they realized they had the capability to realize their educational goal. The common descriptor among the Latinas that completed the baccalaureate is the development of self-efficacy. This term is used following Bandura's (2001) viewpoint of self-efficacy as the belief in one's ability to follow the courses of action required to realize given goals. Some participants reflected on "first" experiences, the day that they chose to attend class rather than skip or the first time they told friends "no" to an evening out and stayed home to study. Others mentioned facing significant financial or life decisions, such as a major home or car repair or getting married, and realizing that, for them, the goal of completing a bachelor's degree had become more important. From this moment of realization, the participants to a person spoke of developing an ardent sense of pride as their accomplishments moved them closer to their goal attainment.

An important component in the development of high-levels of self-efficacy was having a champion of their educational pursuits. Champions may have provided financial support, but the participants mostly noted the constant recognition of achievements and encouragement to persevere towards their goal. Bandura (2001) identifies such actions as social persuasions, one of four sources that affect self-efficacy. Over four-fifths of the participants spoke of having a champion. As indicated previously, participant responses indicate a distinction between family members who have or have not participated in postsecondary education. Family members who had not attended a postsecondary institution served primarily as an influence to participate. Faculty members who had participated in postsecondary education went beyond this initial influence, and were more often mentioned in regard to persistence and completion. In rank order the participants identified champions from their extended family, peers, faculty members, administrators, and people in positions of responsibility (ministers, community leaders, employers).

The tutoring, study skill, and writing services provided by the previously mentioned learning center at SWU are another example of the self-efficacy developed by the participants in this study. The most common phrases used to describe the learning center were that it provided an opportunity to improve skills or abilities or served as a resource to help the student complete a course. Over four-fifths (31 of 36) of the Latinas indicated that they had used services in the learning center at some time during the pursuit of the baccalaureate. All of these individuals indicated that they sought out the assistance and were not referred to the center by a faculty member.

There is consensus that a relationship exists between the culture a student lives in and their preferred ways of learning (Guild, 1994; Torres, 2006). The experiences of the participants in this study indicate recognition of their preferred learning styles and the practice of seeking support or assistance if an assignment or course required a different approach to learning. A number of Latinas reported forming study groups or learning communities within classes, and found these to be especially beneficial when course requirements went beyond their comfort zone. Focusing assignments on their cultural heritage or career interest was also referenced as a strategy leading to success when the pedagogy used by instructors did not match learning preferences. Participants indicated that a number of peers "disappeared" during the semester and did not return for future semesters. Numerous examples of peers who "weren't interested" in a course or questioned the "relevance" of an assignment were provided by the participants and appear to be "hints" that individuals were having difficulty in the course and that attrition was likely.

Reaching the Goal

One of the characteristics that have been found to increase the chances of completing a bachelor's degree is continuous enrollment (Arbona & Nora, 2007). As described previously, some of the Latinas had originally pursued pre-baccalaureate certificates or associate degrees, entered the workforce and then returned to pursue a bachelor's degree. Two of the Latinas that participated in this study did not maintain continuous enrollment, each stopping out for one semester. Three participants enrolled full-time each semester of attendance and one participant enrolled only part-time while completing the baccalaureate. The experiences of the Latinas in this study does not support previous literature on part-time enrollment being a detriment to baccalaureate completion (NCES, 2002). Finances were the primary reason for changes in full- and part-time enrollment patterns as the participants reported a reluctance to rely on student loans to maintain full-time enrollment.

Two-thirds of the participants indicated that they relied heavily on the previously mentioned Latina faculty and administrator role models during the final year or semester of study. A number indicated that they had concerns

with capstone courses, final projects, or standardized tests. Others were not certain about the "next steps" of seeking employment in their field of study or entering graduate school. They identified their willingness to seek out the advice and help of Latina role models as important to the "last steps" in completing degree requirements and considering the future. Three participants described peers who "made it to the doorway, but didn't step through," leaving the institution prior to completing a bachelor's degree, but with few requirements remaining.

As is common in higher education, SWU has a number of steps and deadlines in filing for graduation. The campus provides a number of exit services—a career office that hosts potential employers, provides sessions on job searches, assists in resume preparation; a testing center that provides test-prep courses and exams for graduate or professional school (LSAT, GMAT, MCAT, GRE); and so on. Some Latinas indicated a comfort had developed with SWU, one that made it rather difficult to leave the institution. Bonita shared:

> After completing an associate degree I was able to get a job at the child-care center here as a classroom aide. As an employee my daughter could come here (to the childcare center) for a reduced rate and I was able to take one class free (each semester) as an employee of the university. I became comfortable here, in some ways I didn't want to leave. The career center was very helpful as I approached taking the teacher licensure test, put together a portfolio, applied to districts, interviewed for positions. I'm not sure that without the help I would have accepted a teaching position.

In keeping with the community nature of their culture, SWU had become an important community to the Latinas participating in the study. Perceived as a caring community, it was one they were reluctant to leave.

Conclusions

The primary conclusion of this investigation is the importance of social and cultural capital to the educational achievement of the Latina participants. Social capital points to relationships or networks that lead to opportunity or advantageous outcomes (Coleman, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Cultural capital refers to cultural competencies (e.g., values) that an individual gleans from parents and other cultural brokers, such as faculty (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). A number of sources point to pre-college social and cultural capital as one of the most powerful predictors of achievement (e.g., Adelman, 1999). Of note is the fact that none of the participants mentioned Latina role models from high school as a factor that facilitated their completion of the baccalaureate. In addition, only three of the participants indicated that they were planning to attend postsecondary education as early as the 10th grade. The

experiences of the Latinas in this study indicate that they developed social and cultural capital during their undergraduate years and that the relationships, networks and role models that contributed to these respective forms of capital were influential to their degree completion.

In the case of SWU, there are opportunities for Latinas to develop social and cultural capital. The president of the institution, a significant number of additional Latina administrators and faculty, and a significant Latina student population provide numerous role models, opportunities for formal and informal mentoring, and networks that contributed to the academic success of the participants in this study. Although it is not possible to generalize, there is at least the implication that the experiences of the participants would be different in a setting with limited opportunities to develop such levels of capital. Studies that focus on differences in Latina experiences, based on fewer or greater social and cultural capital opportunities, would appear to be important to adding additional insight into baccalaureate completion rates.

The data also points to the importance of organizational culture. Numerous examples were provided to illustrate that employees of SWU have a comprehensive understanding of the support services provided by the institution and that the institution can "act fast." Mary's experience, shared earlier in this paper, was the most comprehensive illustration of an initial visit to the campus resulting in admission, enrollment, and use of services. A number of other participants, however, shared similar experiences—albeit to a lesser extent. What was common in the stories of the participants was that these events often represented critical incidents in their persistence towards the degree. Mary, for example, indicated that she might not have returned to SWU if she had not had the experience she did on the first day. Others shared instances where many first-line (staff) or lower-level administrators did not simply identify the right office or person, but they took them to that office or individual and made sure that the student received the necessary assistance. Laden (1992) found that organizational culture contributed to the transfer rate of Hispanic students at a California community college. It would appear that the organizational culture at SWU contributed to the retention and degree completion of the Latinas in this study.

A final conclusion is the common attribute of the high level of self-efficacy exhibited by the participants in this study. Self-efficacy contributed to the retention theme as well as to aspects within the reaching the goal theme. Examples of individuals who were not successful in their educational pursuits fit descriptions and definitions of low levels of self-efficacy. The concept of self-efficacy is at the center of Bandura's social cognitive theory (2001). The viewpoint of the Latina participants in this study, to accept challenges rather than avoid them, provides support for both the self-efficacy concept and social cognitive theory.

Much of the research on the graduation rates of Latinos has focused on individual characteristics and experiences that increase or decrease the chances of degree completion. The participants in this study support the previous findings that earning a high school diploma (rather than a GED), enrollment in postsecondary education immediately after high school, and continuous enrollment at a college increase the likelihood of baccalaureate completion (Arbona & Nora, 2007; NCES, 2002; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). Although role models among the faculty and administration at the institution were identified as important to degree completion, the extant literature has pointed to the importance of Latino/a role models among K-12 faculty and administration (Ett, 2008 for example). The importance of role models at the higher education institution to the participants in this study, and the lack of mention of role models in K-12 education, question whether the time the individual experiences the role model or the existence of role models at any level of the educational hierarchy is the primary factor.

More importantly, the experiences of the Latina baccalaureate graduates in this study suggest that attributes of the organization can mitigate individual characteristics and experiences and contribute to educational success. The overwhelming majority of Latinas attended part-time during at least some of their college experience. More than the majority worked full-time, as they were financially independent. A significant number had children and, of these, the overwhelming majority were single parents. More than a third indicated that they were not academically prepared for postsecondary education. Each of these factors are identified as barriers to degree completion. Because SWU had extensive academic support programs, on-campus child-care, and assistance in finding employment, the factors were mitigated for the participants of this study. Additional examinations that explore both characteristics and experiences of individuals and the efforts of institutions to provide the necessary support and services to lessen or remove these obstacles and to improve on prior educational experiences will add further to our understanding of Hispanic completion rates.

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